

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-08

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C O N F I D E N T I A L ATHENS 1715

LIMDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: SOPN, GR, US

SUBJECT: THE GREEK PRESS: MEETING WITH BITSIOS

1. DURING MY MEETING TODAY WITH FOREIGN MINISTER
BITSIOS TO DISCUSS CYPRUS AND OTHER MATTERS (SEPTELS)
I RAISED THE QUESTION OF THE GREEK PRESS. I TOLD
BITSIOS THAT I CONTINUED TO BE CONCERNED ABOUT THE
IRRESPONSIBLE AND AT TIMES OUTRAGEOUS MANNER IN
WHICH CERTAIN GREEK NEWSPAPERS REPORTED ON
U.S. POLICY AND ACTIONS. I TOLD BITSIOS THAT I HAD
OBSERVED A KIND OF EBB AND FLOW RHYTHM IN THE APPEARANCE
OF NEWS ARTICLES AND EDITORIAL COMMENT WHICH COULD
BE CHARACTERIZED AS ANTI-AMERICAN AND THAT BY COLLEAGUES
AND I HAVE FELT THAT FURTUANTELY THE GENERAL TRND IN SUCH ARTICLES
CONTINUES TO BE DOWNWARD. INDEED, AFTER A SPATE
OF ANTI-MERICAN ARTICLES IN THE GREEK PRESS IN
THE DECEMBER-JANUARY PERIOD -- MOSTLY RELATED TO
CIA-- WE HAD NOTED ONCE AGAINA MARKED SUBSIDENCE IN
THE NUMBER OF SUCH ARTICLES OVER THE PAST FEW WEEKS.
EVEN SO, THERE CONTINUED TO BE STORIES PUBLISHED IN
GREEK NEWSPAPERS WHICH HAD NO BASIS IN TRUTH WHAT-
SOEVER AND WHICH SERIOUSLY AFFECT U.S.- GREEK
RELATIONS. MOREOVER, IN SOME CASES THEY COULD
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EVEN BE CONSIDERED AS INCITEMENTS TO VIOLENCE AGAINST

U.S. OFFICIALS AND INSTALLATIONS IN GREECE. I GAVE
BITSIOS SOME EXAMPLES OF WHAT I WAS TALKING ABOUT.

2. BITSIOS SAID HE SHARED MY CONCERN ABOUT THE
GREEK PRESS AND SAID THAT PRIME MINISTER CARAMANLIS
AND OTHER TOP GREEK OFFICIALS DID ALSO. HOWEVER, HE
REGRETTED TO SAY, GREECE HAS HAD AN UNFORTUNATELY LONG
HISTORY OF THIS KIND OF JOURNALISM. IT WAS REALLY A
TERRIBLE DILEMMA FOR THE GOVERNMENT. ON THE ONE HAD,
GREECE HAD ONCE AGAIN REEMERGED INTO A FREE AND DEMOCRATIC
SOCIETY, AND A FREE AND UNCENSORED PRESS WAS AN
ESSENTIAL ELEMENT IN SUCH A DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURE.
AT THE SAME TIME, LACK OF SELF RESTRAINT AND RESPONSIBILITY
ON THE PART OF THE PRESS GREATLY DAMAGED THE COUNTRY
AND THE GOVERNMENT'S EFFORTS TO STRENGTHEN
DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS. IT WAS NOT A NEW PROBLEM
IN GREECE, NOR WAS IT UNKNOWN ELSEWHERE IN THE
WORLD.

3. BITSIOS SAID THAT CARAMANLIS WAS PERSONALLY
DIRECTING GOV EFFORTS TO TRY AND ACHIEVE A HIGHER
DEGREE OF RESPONSIBLE PROFESSIONALISM IN THE
COMMUNICATIONS MEDIA. FORTUNATELY, IN RADIO AND
TELEVISION NEWS -- FROM WHICH MOST GREEKS GET THEIR
NEWS -- RESULTS HAVE BEEN QUITE SATISFACTORY. ON
THE NEWSPAPER SIDE, HOWEVER, THE GOVERNMENT HAS MET
WITH ONLY LIMITED SUCCESS AND IN THE CASE OF A FEW
NEWSPAPERS, NONE WHATSOEVER. BITSIOS AID THAT HE
AND CARAMANLIS AND OTHERS SPENT TREMENDOUS AMOUNTS
OF TIME EVERY WEEK DEALING WITH EDITORS, PUBLISHERS,
AND JOURNALISTS IN AN EFFORT TO IMPROVE THE SITUATION.
AND YET, HE SAID, THE WORST KIND OF STORIES CONTINUE
TO APPEAR. FOR EXAMPLE, LATE LAST WEEK ATHENS
NEWSPAPERS SEEMED TO BE CREATING AN ARTIFICIAL
CRISIS IN THE AEGEAN BETWEEN GREECE AND TURKEY
AS A RESULT OF TURKISH MANEUVERS THERE. BITSIOS
HAD A LARGE SCALE PRESS BACKGROUNDER LAST SATURDAY
IN AN EFFORT TO SET THE RECORD STRAIGHT, SAYING THAT
THE TURKISH MILITARY MANEUVERS WERE QUITE UNDER-
STANDABLE AND NORMAL AND THE TURKISH AUTHORITIES
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HAD INFORMED THE GREEK GOVERNMENT ABOUT THEM WELL
IN ADVANCE. THE RESULT? ON SUNDAY AND MONDAY
SEVERAL NEWSPAPERS WERE BANNERING HEADLINES SUCH AS,
"WAR IN THE AEGEAN*". BITSIOS ALSO REFERRED TO
THE ALMOST DAILY VICIOUS AND OFTEN TOTALLY ABUSIVE
PERSONAL ATTACKS AGAINST HIM AND PERSONNEL IN THE
FOREIGN MINISTRY.

4. AS FAR AS ANTI-AMERICANISM IN THE PRESS WAS CONCERNED, BITSIOS SAID THAT CARAMANLIS HAD ALSO BEEN PERSONALLY TAKING A MAJOR HAND IN TRYING TO TURN THIS AROUND -- HE THOUGHT WITH SOME GOOD RESULTS THUS FAR. BITSIOS GAVE ME A FEW EXAMPLES OF WHAT CARAMANLIS HAD DONE, INCLUDING THE DRAMATIC TURN-AROUND FURING 24 HOURS LAST WEEK ON THE HANDLING BY THE GREEK PRESS OF THE HOUSE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE'S ACTION ON ASSISTANCE TO GREECE AND TURKEY. BITSIOS SAID THAT THE GOG WAS ALSO AWARE OF THE STRONG EFFORTS KEY OFFICIALS OF USIS AND THE EMBASSY HAVE BEEN MAKING IN TRYING TO KEEP THE RECORD STRAIGHT IN THE GREEK PRESS, AND HE THOUGHT THESE WERE ALL TO THE GOOD.

5. WE CLOSED THIS PORTION OF OUR DISCUSSION WITH AGREEMENT THAT WE SIMPLY WOULD HAVE TO KEEP PLUGGING AWAY AND COOPERATE AS CLOSELY AS POSSIBLE IN DEALING WITH EXPECIALLY SERIOUS AND SENSITIVE ITEMS AS THEY APPEAR IN THE PRESS.
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